

GOVERNMENT IN THE LIMELIGHT VERSUS GOVERNMENT IN THE DARK

THE LONG BALLOT IS THE GREAT AMERICAN FLIMFLAM

CITIZENSHIP THAT IS "FOR EXPERTS ONLY"

So we have Government-by-Politicians instead of
Government-by-the-People

THE REMEDY IS "THE SHORT BALLOT"

by RICHARD S. CHILDS.

BOSSES, corrupt government in states and cities, political machines and an indignant but almost helpless people—all are the result of having more elective offices than the people can keep track of.

Now, follow the reasoning carefully step by step, for I want you to understand clearly how the long ballot is the politician's ballot and the short ballot is the people's ballot. And keep open minded if you can, to the very end of my explanation.

The Long Ballot.

Take Ohio, for instance. In this state the people elect the governor, lieutenant governor, secretary of state, state treasurer, three railroad commissioners, attorney general, auditor, clerk of the supreme court, superintendent of public instruction, dairy and food commissioner and a lot of judges and county officials, a total list of forty odd. The ballot on election day is a yard square and contains the names of about 200 candidates.

What happens? The people go to the polls on election day and get the big official ballot. There on the ballot is a group of names of candidates for secretary of state, for instance. Smith and Jones and Robinson have been nominated for the office, and the people are to say which of them shall get it. Do the people have a clear idea of what Smith and Jones and Robinson look like, what their records are and what their abilities are? You think they do, do you? Well, how about the candidates for clerk of the supreme court? Do the people know them too? And those dozen candidates for the railroad commissions? And the rest of the 200 candidates? The people are supposed to know all of them, but they in actual fact?

Not the People's Fault.

Perhaps you say the people don't know now, but they ought to bestrut themselves and find out? Well, let's see if they ought. How are they to do it? The newspapers haven't the space for all the information. No doubt each candidate would like to have the papers publish a lot about him every day. If the papers did try to do it, could the average man ever endure reading all that stuff? And if he did, could he ever remember his forty separate opinions long enough to get his ballot marked?

Perhaps you say, "The people ought to go into politics and learn that way." But the average man will say he hasn't the time and strength to go to caucuses and primaries and conferences and district battles and all that. Isn't he right about it? If he had time and energy enough for politics, shouldn't he rather devote it to profitable work so that he can afford to give his wife a nicer home or his son a better education? Shouldn't he work just as hard as he can for his family, even if politics does go to the dogs? If this average man did go into politics and work night and day to make politics better, everybody would soon be sneering, "If that fellow would give his business the attention he gives to uplifting the state, his children wouldn't be wearing such old clothes." And wouldn't they be justified?

The people are all right. They are doing just what they ought to be doing under the conditions. They attend to politics as much as they can. They vote for the good of the state as far as they have light to see which candidate is good and which is bad. They demand good governors and mayors and usually get them. There is light to see by in the case of these offices, but all the little offices they leave to the party by voting a straight ticket blindly. The little places are the perquisites of the political experts who make a profession of citizenship.

Danger in Government by Politicians.

The party machine is absolutely necessary while we have blind voting. Without a machine, politics would be worse chaos than it is. But what is a party machine? An organization which anybody can join—any good man or any bad man. There's no way of barring the bad man out. If all the good men in a town got together and formed a strong party, the bad men would join it, and as it means money to them, they would work very hard until they dominated that party and crowded out the good men. There's no way by which a party can resist this inevitable contamination.

A party is therefore unfit to hold appointive power. Let it recommend candidates, but the people must inspect its offerings with suspicion and thoroughness. But when the candidates are only small fry that are hardly worth the labor of inspection or when there are so many offices to watch that the people can't possibly inspect all the candidates, then there is peril. For the party, knowing that its minor candidates won't be scrutinized, knowing that it will get little credit for a good nomination and little discredit for a bad one, is sure, sooner or later, to fall into the hands of leaders who will utilize these opportunities for profitable mischief. The condition simply invites crime. It is like a treasure without a guard. The long ballot provides all the paraphernalia of a flimflam game.

How the Flimflam Works.

Now enter the flimflammer. Let us say that a railroad happens to need a friendly board of railroad commissioners. The railroad makes connection with a few bosses or sends some agents to the caucuses. In due time Mr. Train (a friend of railroads) is spoken of in favorable terms as a prospective candidate for railroad commissioner. Later on he is duly nominated. The people hear practically nothing about him. A protest from some man who sees the trick gets no publicity. Mr. Train and all that he stands for is safely concealed in the crowd—lost in the shuffle. With forty other Republicans or Democrats he gets elected by just about the same plurality that the state treasurer and the attorney general received. A railroad that couldn't get "safe" men on such a railroad commission if it really wanted to, would be a pretty feeble road. Wouldn't you despise the intelligence of a railroad management that couldn't "get past the people" in such a confused election?

But suppose instead of forty offices on that ballot there were only four, the rest being appointive. Would it be easier or harder for the railroad to sneak its nomination through? If a movement for such a short ballot started in Ohio, can't you see the railroad men shrieking that such concentration of power would be "undemocratic," "dangerous to liberty" and "taking away power from the people?"

What the Long Ballot Means.

The longer the ballot the harder for the people to see what they are doing and the easier for rascals to get in.

The longer the ballot the easier to flimflam the people.

The longer the ballot the less the people rule and the more the politician rules.

The longer the ballot the less real democracy you have.

Democracy Can't Work in the Dark.

Democracy, like photography, won't work without light. The people must be able to see what they are doing. If for lack of information they are obliged to accept the party label as the only reason for voting for a man, oligarchy is the result—not democracy. To thrust upon the people more duties than they have time to perform is undemocratic. The duty of selecting a coroner is only a needless nuisance. It is not a right or a privilege. It is not the kind of liberty the pilgrims crossed the sea for. Democracy does not mean electing everybody. It means control by the people, and the best popular control is obtained by having the issues simple and plain and clear. The people now are swamped, and the politician is in glee. No one but the politician has use for complex politics.

No one but the politician wants citizenship to be one of the learned professions.

No one but the politician wants to see the average citizen scared out of politics by the hard work involved.

The "Short Ballot."

We shall never get government by the people until all the people know the candidates for all the elective offices. How else can the people do the choosing for themselves? We must get the short ballot. We must ask the people to choose no more officials than experience shows they will choose. The electoral burden of the people must be reduced to practicable limits. The platform of the Short Ballot Organization which President Woodrow Wilson of Princeton has recently formed expresses it this way:

"Only those offices should be elective which are important enough to attract (and deserve) public examination; and, 'Very few offices should be filled by election at one time so as to permit adequate and unconfused public examination of the candidates.'"

Simple, isn't it? "Public examination" is the key to it. Elect no more than you can take a good look at. Buy no more political goods than you can inspect.

The Short Ballot Applied.

Let's be definite about it. Suppose we make the state government as simple as the national government, electing just the governor and the legislature and letting the governor appoint the other state officers. Suppose for small cities we adopt the Des Moines commission plan of government—just five to elect and no more. Suppose for large cities we gave the council complete charge so that the ballot in each ward would look like the little one from England reproduced herewith. What chance is there for a political expert to work his flimflam game then? The people are on the job with a searchlight. There is no obscurity, no public

bewilderment, no confusion to shelter the tricks of politicians or railroads. The short ballot is a ballot that the people can handle. It is the only kind they should have. To give them anything else is to bungle them.

With a short ballot we can get better government. Government entirely in the limelight is bound to be better than government half in the dark. Look at the success of commission government in Galveston and Des Moines. The short ballot is the gist of it. Look at the English and Scotch cities—the best governed in the world. The short ballot is the secret of their success.

Think over the list of offices you have to vote for. How many of them receive adequate public examination? Those that do not should either be made appointive or should be made more conspicuous and important by added powers and enlarged responsibilities until they do attract adequate examination. Your members of the state legislature, for example. They can't be made appointive, but can be made more important. The legislature should be made smaller and the districts enlarged until a legislator ranks as high as the governor and gets the same kind of purifying limelight.

To add the United States senator to the list of elective offices would lengthen the ballot, but it is not contrary to the short ballot doctrine, because that is so important and conspicuous an office that it will always get the public examination that is so vital to popular control.

County clerks or state treasurers, however, should never be elective, even if the ballot be short, because they are naturally obscure offices and the people are sure to get flimflammed.

Real Politics Instead of Peanut Politics.

The short ballot movement is no appeal to civic laziness or dainty aristocracy. It is not a justification of the man who thinks only of his own affairs and ignores those of the community. We are getting rather away from such narrow selfishness. We talk of conservation of national resources, regulation of the labor of women and children, the square deal in railroad rates, the betterment of tenements, the prevention of tuberculosis—those things are our real politics. The word "civics," which describes them, is a word of special American coinage taking the place that "politics" held before it became degraded in its significance. The citizen does have duties in such directions.

But "peanut politics," that unique American institution, is a different matter. It is not our duty to fret over whether Jones or Smith shall be made a delegate to a county convention to nominate a candidate for coroner or whether the Brown faction or the Robinson crowd shall control the patronage of the county clerk's office. "Taking an interest in politics" ought to mean something bigger than hanging around political headquarters or learning the names of the county committee. The citizen owes no duty to peanut politics except to get it abolished to clear the way to the big common welfare kind of politics that lies beyond. The short ballot would leave no reason for the further existence of peanut politics or the oligarchy that it creates.

Colleges Teach the Short Ballot Principle.

The short ballot is a sound and well established axiom in political science. Every college is teaching it. Men like Woodrow Wilson and Charles W. Eliot are pleading for it. Theodore Roosevelt, Governor Hughes of New York, Governor Fort of New Jersey, Winston Churchill, Ben B. Lindsey and Norman Hapgood are for it and have all tried to wean the people away from that stupid old superstition that to have everybody elective is giving the people power. At last we are waking up, and the long ballot, the greatest flimflam game the world has ever seen, is on its way into limbo.

The People Are All Right—It's the System That's Wrong.

Let's stop the old false cry that bad government is the people's fault. As if our people could be rotten in politics and sound as a bell in everything else! Nonsense!

There is nothing the matter with Americans. We are by far the most intelligent and moral electorate in the world. We are not apathetic. Apathy is a purely relative matter depending on how much is asked. Ask much of the people and you will see more apathy than if you ask little. If the people of Glasgow were asked to attend caucuses, primaries, conventions and rallies in support of the best candidate for coroner they, too, would stay home by their firesides and let the worst man have it. If they had our long ballot they would be in a worse mess than we are with it, and for the same reason. We are not apathetic. Apathy is a purely relative matter depending on how much is asked. Ask much of the people and you will see more apathy than if you ask little. If the people of Glasgow were asked to attend caucuses, primaries, conventions and rallies in support of the best candidate for coroner they, too, would stay home by their firesides and let the worst man have it. 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